Nabokov in the Age of Snapchat

Whenever I assign a long reading for homework or offer to peruse one collectively, a tremendous sigh can be heard filling up the room. Groans of "Do we have to?" or "I've never read anything that long in my life" punctuate the anticipated boredom, and everyone settles in to (grudgingly) do the work.

For instructors, that isn't a rare occurrence. Our roles require us teach basic tenets of literature, engage students in thinking about rhetoric and symbolism, and ideally guide them as they evolve into better writers and critical thinkers. However, as we try to reach students who are reading increasingly shorter and shorter pieces, or not at all, one question arises: Do we need to change how and what we teach in English courses, or is it already too late?

While many an article has decried the death of writing and literature across the disciplines, studies and research suggest something far more interesting. Many students feel that they're soured on reading and engagement with literature in rote high school English courses. Those few students who do enjoy reading and writing are unlikely to pursue an English major, favoring instead careers that offer more immediate job opportunities and high earning potential.

Furthermore, at the end of a long day of course work and meetings, those few avid readers are less likely to reach for a bedside novel; they opt instead for a few clips of Carpool Karaoke or *Lip Sync Battle* to wind down with. There will always be students who read, but now they're an exception to the rule -- and just as likely as their peers to seek out a quick sugar jolt of consumable media instead of a weighty existential novel.

So, if we're ultimately going to lose the battle, the least we can do is gain some sort of ground, some sort of compromise between what our positions require and the reality of life outside the classroom. As a single voice in a great and varied sea of professors, I can only suggest what seems to be an appropriate course of action from my perspective.

I've thought about this carefully, mulling it over as I drive between the two-year and four-year colleges where I teach. While the students vary in background, refinement and ability at both institutions, I noticed that retaining students proved to be a massive struggle at the community college, let alone getting them to engage texts in a critical way. With that in mind, I came up with four ideas that could go a long way in helping students to find their way back to being interested in English courses.

Rip up the reading curriculum and start again. While some institutions offer courses with reading selections from the likes of Zadie Smith, Colson Whitehead and Nicole Krauss, too many offer stale, if not outdated, reading options that fail to encourage critical thought or spark a dialogue about the merits and historical lineage of a text. What's worse, some universities simply treat their English course offerings as an excuse to rehash the high school reading list, as I learned during a recent visit to my undergraduate alma mater.

If we want to get students interested in the work we're doing in class, we need to use texts that challenge them in a way that's appropriate for 2016. While we may want to delve into works that have weighty moral themes or complex ethical issues, we should recognize that those values may be so far in the rearview mirror of our students as to border on insulting.

That's not to say that Milton and Millay need to vanish from the dusty shelves of the university bookstore, but we need to consider (and understand) the values our students have. Nongender, nonbinary, vegan, fleegan, culturally non-Muslim or polyamorous, our students come from varied and nuanced backgrounds, so while they might scoff at Shakespeare's use of gender or roll their eyes at Hemmingway's aggro antics, they might be a bit more willing to engage in a dialogue about said texts when juxtaposed with Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* or Hilton Als's *White Girls*.

Instead of trying to be cool, make it a point to follow trends in student tech behavior. While attending a recent conference, I decided to sit in on a panel about using social media in the classroom. Expecting a presentation focused on ways to integrate WhatsApp and Periscope into lesson plans, imagine my surprise when a middle-aged woman, well-meaning as she might have been, began with the line "Today, so many of our students are on Twitter and Snapchat, it's hard to keep up."

If this were a panel in 2013 or 2014, then those examples might be applicable, but even then it would have been a bit of a stretch. While our students may be familiar with Vine videos and Snapchat Stories, those are aspects of social media and social entertainment that are near relics compared to what came out this year -- or even this month. Our students already roll their eyes when we try to reference Kendrick or Killer Mike in class, and trying to work in outdated social media-centric activities only spotlights how out of the loop one is. By following a few simple tech blogs, asking around and paying attention to student chatter on campus, we can swap out feeble tweet-writing exercises in favor of something that directly engages current social media in the here and now.

Develop platforms that would engage students on their tech turf while still maintaining the integrity of university standards. Taking the last point a step farther, creating or using tech platforms to engage students beyond the borders of the classroom would help students to prioritize class and feel less of a disconnect between their social lives and the performance expectations of a collegiate setting. In a world where gamification is becoming increasingly popular on campuses, teaching everything from proper sexual conduct to the proper way to incorporate footnotes into a paper, making the extra effort to introduce a tech component to existing lesson plans would begin to bridge the gap between the old-school demands of course pedagogy and the buzzy, plugged-in, viral video world of these young adults.

By recording a lesson and uploading it to Soundcloud or one of the many emerging audio platforms, sick students uninterested in checking email for a vague description of a missed class session can listen to a light recap of what was covered and complete homework without a hitch. On short breaks or those days when classes might be canceled due to weather, one can create a group chat on WhatsApp and assign a group project that will encourage students to text about that rarest of things: a properly cited MLA paper.

Realize that your professional obsessions are underserving your classes. Maybe you think that this semester is going to be the one when you finally run that two-month exploration of Dracula's dietary restrictions in postwar Europe. You've done the research, gathered the materials, developed appropriate course content and have images of scholarly and hungry students dancing in your coffee-addled head. If you can make your passion project work, then great.

However, if you find that students don't cotton to it, resist the urge to buck against them. At conferences, off-campus meetings and writing centers, professors continuously gripe about their struggle with interesting students in their pet projects. This aggression can be harmful, as it can often lead to bitterness, resentment and a penchant for viewing students as "lesser" minds for failing to engage material they found to be dry, arduous and beyond their realm of relatability.

We all know professors who have stumbled down this unfortunate path. Perhaps you share an office with them. Instead of adding to the gap between our scholarly hopes and students' increasing disinterest in literary course work, acknowledge that in the interest of a having a productive class, your dreams may have to wait.